

A Rumor of War Study Guide

A Rumor of War by Philip Caputo

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Plot Summary

At the tender age of twenty, Caputo enlists in the Marine Corps in the hopes to end his dreary days of comfortable living in a small, mid-western suburban town. He enters the war with romantic notions of being a hero, with thoughts of ending the war within a few short weeks or months and returning home to a parade of patriotic countrymen that will slap him on the back and ask him to tell them another heroic tale of his adventures in Vietnam. What he finds, however, is a rude awakening to the realities of a battle fought in the middle of the jungle with Viet Cong who refuse to play by the rules he has learned in his military training. In the thick of the jungle, Caputo learns the reality of war, while he comes to understand himself, as least as much as he comes to understand the enemy.

Philip Caputo was raised in the small prairie town of Westchester, Illinois, full of hot dogs, apple pies and ice cream. Yet, like countless other youth during this time, his strong desire to prove himself as a man, coupled with Kennedy's famous Inaugural Address to the nation, pulls him into the patriotic world of standing up for his country and defending its ideals with guns, if necessary.

During schooling at Loyola College, Caputo enlists with the Marines' ROTC program. At Basic Training, advanced training and Officer Basic School, Caputo learns much about Marine history, battle tactics and weaponry. However, what he really wants is just to get out there and have some adventure and, more than anything else, some experiences that will turn him into a man.

In January 1965, Caputo gets his chance. His first command as an officer begins with the men in Third Marine Division in Okinawa, Japan. Days there pass by uneventfully with the only sign of going into any battle being false alarms, delays, and frustrations. On March 7, 1965, however, three Companies, including Caputo's, are finally assigned to war. Boys and young men clamber onto planes with spirits full of adventure.

When first arriving in Danang, Vietnam, Caputo and his men step into what feels to them like just another military exercise. In a strict defensive operation, they stare at maps marked with grease pencils, patrol the borders of the military base, and dodge snipers each evening. They dig foxholes in the case of an attack and pile up one sandbag after another to protect them from enemy fire they never see.

Minor skirmishes come in slowly, much too slowly for Caputo and his men. They spend their days fighting mosquitoes rather than Viet Cong (VC), and their complacency slowly overtakes their excitement to be in the war. On April 22, another company is attacked by a band of VC. This trivial battle proves to be the turning point for Caputo and the others. After the excitement of the chase, the men finally get a chance to stage offensive attacks.

Amidst monsoon rains, biting insects, infectious diseases, random VC sniper fire, and eventually full out battles, the Marines charge into their romantic notions of war. They



search villages full of hidden VC. They creep along passages laden with explosive mines trip wire, or ambushes. They hardly sleep, eat cold food, and slash through miles of jungle in the rain. With every step, they are running on a high that comes from staring down death, knowing at any moment, any of them could be shot by a sniper or blown to bits by a mine. This environment of high tension, however, comes at a price. Slowly, Caputo and his men begin showing signs of psychological trauma from the stress loads. Anger boils up from deep wells; they burn down villages and begin to hate.

At this point, Caputo is pulled off the firing line to receive training in Japan as an assistant adjutant before returning to headquarters back at Danang. During his stint as adjutant, he becomes more and more frustrated by rules that make sense on paper, but not to troops like his that are fighting in the jungle. He also gets to know death personally, as he takes on the duty of reporting casualties. In this job, Caputo sees death counts on both sides mount higher and higher. He comes to see all the lives that are being wrecked by the war. For the first time, he begins to question what America is doing in Vietnam.

Caputo's resentment to his comfortable office assignment grows stronger, when he learns that several men from his company have been killed. He succumbs to hallucinations, anxiety and depression, like many others around him. More than ever, Caputo wrestles with his mortality and with his desires to head back out there with "his men."

In November of 1966, Caputo is finally granted permission to return to line duty, where his men face constant tension without relief. In the conditions they have been living and fighting, Caputo crumbles within the first twenty-four hours, but manages to hold on to his sanity long enough to be granted a three day R&R a month later. Caputo considers deserting in Saigon, but after three days of rest, he finds himself waiting for a cargo plane, full of the dead, which will take him back to the lines and the men he knows he cannot desert.

Life on the front lines continues, and the men are tired, angry, depressed, hungry and wet. They have fought long enough and hard enough to see their romance of war vanish into the reality of it. Moments of temporary insanity increase, as they burn down a village of over two hundred Vietnamese civilians, laughing at the flames and the people whose lives they've destroyed.

The madness continues, when Caputo learns the location of two Viet Cong, who are in a nearby village. In a fit of borderline insanity, he orders their capture, and if necessary their execution, in retaliation for the lives of all the men lost in this battle.

Five months later, Caputo, along with one of his Marines, finds himself in front of a jury that is trying him for the murder of the two boys that were executed under his orders. Bewildered, Caputo searches his memory for the events that brought him there. He's been told to kill Vietnamese (VC or otherwise), and he kills. Now he is being tried for murder.



Caputo finds the trial hard to believe. Although eventually, he is found not guilty (of all but the misdemeanor of lying under oath), Caputo has a lot of time to come to understand the cover-ups the military is making with war. Shortly thereafter, Caputo is released on honorable discharges. By this point Caputo and his men have fought long enough to see their hard work amount to nothing, and most, if not all of them, just want to go home. In 1967 he leaves Vietnam.

Caputo returns to Vietnam ten years later as a field correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune* to report on the final moments of the war before Saigon is overrun by the North Vietnamese. In the impending confusion and fear that encompasses thousands of people trying to evacuate by land, sea or air, Caputo comes full circle with his feelings on the war. Once safe upon a helicopter assault ship in the South China Sea, Caputo and many others are left to feel the weight of the end of a decade of war.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

At the tender age of twenty, Caputo enlists in the Marine Corps in the hopes to end his dreary days of comfortable living in a small, mid-western suburban town. He enters the war with romantic notions of being a hero, with thoughts of ending the war within a few short weeks or months and returning home to a parade of patriotic countrymen that will slap him on the back and ask him to tell them another heroic tale of his adventures in Vietnam. What he finds, however, is a rude awakening to the realities of a battle fought in the middle of the jungle with Viet Cong who refuse to play by the rules he has learned in his military training. In the thick of the jungle, Caputo learns the reality of war, while he comes to understand himself, as least as much as he comes to understand the enemy.

Caputo begins his story by impressing upon the reader the background to the events that led up to the United States' involvement with the Vietnam War. There was the high patriotism of a nation that had recently been through World War II, the complacency that set in now that the country was booming again, and the government's push to abolish Communism in the world.

Beyond this, Caputo lists several personal reasons for wanting to go to war. First, there was Kennedy's Inaugural Address, asking men what they can for their country. Then, there was Caputo's own need to be, and to be seen by others, as a man. Finally, there was his own desire for excitement and danger.

Caputo chooses to enlist with the Marines because they promise all of the above. Through the Marines' version of Basic Training at Camp Upshur, Virginia, then an advanced training in Quantico, Virginia two years later and Officers Basic School upon graduation from Loyola College, Caputo learns battle tactics. He also learns survival skills, Marine history, rules and regulations, weaponry, and most importantly, how to kill.

Through it all, however, Caputo realizes looking back, that he was merely playing a game. He wanted so badly to be a man and in the middle of danger, that he didn't realize he was toying with death. There was nothing he learned during all this training that could have actually prepared him for what he saw in the jungles of Vietnam.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The opening of the novel introduces a theme that holds together throughout the book. They are the reasons why men go to war. Although one man's reasons may differ slightly from another's, most of them come very close. These young men (and now women, too) are trying to prove to themselves and their country that they are men (and women.) They want the adventure and romance. They also want to serve their country, even when that country isn't being honest with them.



Caputo desperately wants the reader to understand this message. By describing what is happening in the American country at the time of Vietnam and by giving his personal views as a war veteran, he hopes to impress the understanding of the futility of the Vietnam War - and of all wars. Caputo's vocabulary as well as his somber tone leaves the reader in doubt of his stance on war. He sees them as pointless wastes of human lives.

By setting up the story in this manner, Caputo narrates his tale to show why men were so eager to go to Vietnam initially and why they became so greatly disillusioned after fighting there.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

After his training as an officer, Caputo receives his first command post in Okinawa, Japan with a group of forty Marines in the Third Marines Division. Instead of being greeted by men who have labored long and hard at a battlefield, he is greeted by men who play in the jungle by day and drink with the prostitutes by night.

Caputo tries to fit in with his platoon, men who have enlisted, trained and traveled together from the beginning. However, he feels more like a stranger in a strange land. Slowly, Caputo comes to know some of the men, and he realizes they, like he, all have the desire to stop sitting around and get to the business of war.

This time spent is not wasted however, as Caputo does learn important lessons about command here. In particular, on one fateful day in the jungle, Caputo learns the value of fitting in and getting the approval of his superiors. This lesson is one he takes with him to Vietnam and one he later struggles with as his disapproval for the war surfaces.

There are several false alarms of going to war, but none pan out for the men, and they quickly become tired of the game of "hurry up and wait."

Chapter 2 Analysis

In a sometimes humorous account, this chapter shows the reader the psyche of a soldier. Caputo describes how a subtle form of mind control takes over the soldiers training for war. The men in this novel have the history of the Marines at stake. They have their honor, their manhood, and their country to defend. Add to that, that a desire within the soldiers to succeed and to be praised has been awakened, and you get young men willing to do just what they are told by those very men they honor, the heads of the government. Now those willing men are given guns and told repeatedly they are going to war, just to be told later that, no, they are not, and these same men become anxious, dangerous men - with weapons!



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The author continues to show the reader the realities of war, as they unfold to him. The Marines' excitement continues to pull them into eagerly fighting a war they think they cannot lose.

Caputo introduces the reader to proud men and then follows that introduction with accounts of how they either died or were severely wounded in combat. The novel begins to take on a sinister tone.

Caputo's men, along with two other companies, get orders to go to Vietnam, this time for real. However, instead of being ready to run off to war, the men are out drinking or having fun with the prostitutes. Caputo helps to round them up, before they pack up and ship out on giant C-130 planes. They leave at 8:00 p.m. on March 8th for Danang, Vietnam on a defensive assignment.

The men spend their first day in Danang packing and piling sandbags, digging foxholes and ditches as disappointment sets in. They thought they were going to war. Although they hear of death and paralysis for some soldiers, a dog is blown up as is a sandbag between two men in a foxhole, they still do not see the war as really happening yet. Night brings sniper fire in the distance, swarms of biting insects, and Caputo's first display of nervousness of being hit by enemy fire.

Chapter 3 Analysis

This chapter is the first step in the turning point to the men's attitudes about the war. Their excitement is overcast, however slightly, with the reality of battle. Real bullets are fired, not blanks like in their training exercises.

Deaths, paralysis, coffins, dogs blown up, sandbags shot to bits, all of this serves as a warning to these men that the "war," although seemingly removed from their safety at Company headquarters, is real. And it's just beyond their perimeter. Someone, anyone, could be killed. Through skillful language, however, Caputo lets us know that he and his men really do not understand this concept yet. They know it intellectually, but what they feel is more akin to what boy scouts feel on a mission to overtake a playful enemy.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

For over a month, Caputo and the rest of the Marines continue with perimeter patrols, building barricades, digging ditches, and a whole lot of waiting to see direct action. Men become sick from various ailments, including diarrhea, dysentery, malaria and "fevers of unknown origin." Between the heat, the thick dust that settles on everything, and the waiting, the men of C Company sink into a state of depression.

They see their first action when they relieve another platoon on Hill 327, where more waiting follows. It is not until April 22, that a skirmish takes place between the Viet Cong (VC) and B Company that the first real engagement fought by an American unit takes place. This first real pump of adrenaline makes the commanders decide to turn their defensive mission into an offensive one, and they make plans to engage in a search and destroy operation.

Caputo and the rest of the men become like little kids, excited to do their part at playing knight in shining armor. Although some of the platoon sergeants try to warn the young Marines on what lies ahead, their words are lost on the uninitiated.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The realities of war - disease, infection, biting insects, and the ever present desire, the hope, that they will be called into direct battle with the enemy - plague the men. Wearing them down and building them up, these conditions result in a roller coaster of emotions that will come to a head later.

Although the previous chapter has at least a few somber glimpses of men who have been wounded or killed at war, this chapter throws the men right back into the "dying to fight" mentality of hunters, who have been denied the hunt. This up and down play of emotions is a direct intent to involve the reader with the story, to feel the same up and down emotions as the soldiers in the field. At one moment, they know they can die, and the next, they just want to get a turn to play the game. Until war and the death it can bring become real to them, they (as well as the reader) will continue on this roller coaster of views.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Caputo awakens to the sound of war. Ivan guns are roaring off, and he is struck with conflicting emotions. He both wants to see and not see action. They are served an unprecedented steak and eggs breakfast, one last good meal for the road that lie ahead. Amidst stunning jungle scenery and a cool early morning breeze, howitzers fire and helicopters fly three teams of soldiers directly into their first major battle.

They arrive in the Annamese Cordillera, VC territory. Looking for a small VC battalion in the vast jungle, they pan out in patrols. In the thickness of the vegetation, they can barely see beyond the soldier in front of them. They are gripped with fear, even though not much happens besides a few random shots being fired by the enemy.

Four hours and only three bushwhacked miles later, Caputo and his men reach a village, which they stop to search. They find signs of enemy activity there including one elderly woman who is caught in the act of making anti-helicopter devices. Although she is obviously a supplier to the VC, Caputo's compassion for her overcomes him, and he orders her release. Enemy snipers fire at them, ever taunting them back into the thickness of the jungle.

Caputo and his platoon file back into the jungle, only to become pinned down by enemy fire. They hit the ground, completely immobilized by the enemy. When Caputo attempts to give the move out signal, a sniper nearly hits him, and he's left to think over the coldness of killing. When the shooting is finished, they search for ghost soldiers that have long since vanished back into the vast green thickets. After a full day of searching and shooting, Caputo admits they have accomplished nothing.

Chapter 5 Analysis

After his first real encounter, Caputo and his platoon are learning the lessons of war the hard way. They are beginning to see that they are not as invincible as they previously thought. They can be shot at, hit, and maybe even killed. This they had already discovered before, but that lesson is repeated here as they hadn't completely internalized it yet.

Like a woodpecker pounding away slowly yet constantly at a hallowed out tree, it takes awhile for the lesson of their own mortality to get through to them. Even Caputo, an officer in the Marines, cannot seem to break through all of the mind control he has received by his training and let go of the notion that he can just ride in on his shiny white horse and save the world with a single blow. This evolution of their mind, and their spirits, continues deeper and deeper. With each encounter with the enemy, they are stripping away what they have been taught and replacing it with reality.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

In a stream of consciousness style of writing, Caputo recounts his early day of fighting in the spring of 1965. Jumbled memories of battles are rolled over one by one, like waves lapping upon the shore of Caputo's memory. Lance Corporal Stone's hand is shot, a corpsman is paralyzed, guns misfire, Viet Cong ambush them, fellow men succumb to heat stroke, a soldier will die in a few days from his injuries, and the third platoon burn down a village out of anger and spite.

Through the narrative, Caputo makes it clear that he and the other men are beginning to see how much damage is being done, both physically and psychologically. Worst of all, the soldiers "are learning to hate." (Chapter 6, p. 110)

Chapter 6 Analysis

Caputo no longer tries to hide his messy, garbled memories from us. He has drawn us into battle with him and is now ready to unleash the realities of war as he saw them in Vietnam. One by one, we are introduced to the physical and emotional casualties of war that shaped his early experiences in Vietnam.

Fear and sadness, gentleness and fury, the clarity of saneness and the delusions of madness are all rolled into one conglomerate called a soldier. The lesson of their mortality is learned. Now, the men must learn deeper, darker lessons, of the illusion of separateness and what they are capable of under fire.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Once again Caputo and C Company are flown into a deserted jungle southwest of Danang for a head on assault with the enemy. From the landing zone, C Company begins to cross a murky stream only to retreat when called to retrace their steps in pursuit of a band of VC headed toward the jungles on Hill 270.

The Americans advanced weaponry forces the VC to retreat across the swamp and into the jungle. C Company discovers a still burning fire scorching no-doubt important VC documents, and they realize a VC must still be close. When they follow his trail of blood into the jungle, it leads them to a hidden base camp where they find photos of the VC and their families, letters from home. Even more disconcerting, they discover the VC are just like them, kids with family and friends back home.

This discovery clouds their emotions, mingling the Marines' pride of a kill with the guilt of what they have just done. By the time Caputo and his men set up camp that evening, each man begins to deal with overpowering conflicting emotions in his own way. Some talk bravely about the killing. Others narrate the battle in an attempt to talk through it. Some still try to romanticize it. However, all sooner or later fall into the silence of the sadness that will continue to overtake them for some time to come.

Chapter 7 Analysis

This first head to head combat helps the soldiers experience death close-up and personal. This is important as the men not only have to see and touch the dead, but they also have to carry them. The symbolism of that situation cannot be any stronger; for the first time, the men have to carry the weight of what they have done. They see that the VC they are killing are just like them. The enemy letters and photos they find could have easily have been what would have been found at one of their own camps. This understanding forces them to take a closer look into the faces of the young VC soldiers they have just killed, and with closer inspection, the enemy looks just like them. All the Marines' conditioning, and the men's inner savagery, their desires to win the war and go home, none of that can take away the guilt and sadness of the acts they have just committed.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

After a sleepless night at the landing zone, C Company continue their jungle pursuit of the enemy, passing back through Giao Tri and shuttling by truck convoy back to the safe hold of Battalion headquarters. The next afternoon, "Liberty" is called, and twenty-five men are hauled to Danang for a night of booze and sex.

With that small refresher of spirits, two more weeks of operations lead to much the same conditions as they have just passed through. There are bush searches, ambushes, sniper fire, waiting and a few more Liberties. Some Marines are wounded here and there, although no deaths are reported for Caputo's Company.

Toward the end of May, Caputo is ordered to return for a week to Okinawa, Japan to receive training as an assistant adjutant. Caputo, now extremely close to the men in his company, tries to get around the assignment and stay on the line with his men without success.

Chapter 8 Analysis

In this chapter, the reader sees the morality of the men thrown in their faces again and again. The readers sees their fears of death when grenades land too close and they have wives and children at home who are counting on them to return, their wishes to conquer the VC and just get back home, their needs to unwind from the stress of war. All of these mutual emotions and desires thicken into a strong glue that holds the men together. The message is being formed that the men are fighting for each other just as much as they are fighting for their country.

When Caputo is reassigned away from the front lines, he feels nothing short of regret to have to leave his men. This comes not only from the bonds they have created but also from Caputo's own fear of being away from the pack. Waging war day in and day out has created a strong sense of unity. Being ripped away from that unity brings feelings of pain and fear of isolation from the unit he is using to define who he is as a soldier and a Marine fighting the enemy.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Caputo returns to Danang after his training in Japan and nestles in at Company Headquarters. However upon returning to C Company's camp to retrieve items he stored there before leaving for Japan, he is greeted by a somber, distant mood from his old platoon. After a brief period, he discovers that Sullivan was killed by an enemy sniper while filling canteens at the riverfront. This is C Company's first casualty, and it hits them all like a slap in the face. Caputo is left alone on his trip back to headquarters. All through dinner, he ponders over death. He thinks of Sullivan, himself and his men.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Although Caputo and his men have been hit with the lesson of their own mortality time and time again, this seems to be a hard lesson for them to learn. Now with the first casualty of a man in their own company, death is no longer somewhere out there, but right here beside them, staring them down in a hostile greeting. To make matters even worse, Sullivan was not fighting in the thick of the jungle, when he was killed. He was peacefully filling canteens by a river, not a care in the world. That death could have just have easily been any one of them. Now, death stares at them in the mirror, and they have to look at it every time they look at each other or at themselves. Caputo makes it clear through his old company's reaction as well as his own that the bull brunt of that lesson has finally been learned.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Caputo takes on various part-time responsibilities commonly assigned to junior staff. He handles casualty reporting, maintaining control of secret and confidential documents, and taking care of legal issues the mess hall. The most important of these to Caputo's mental and emotional development becomes his duty of casualty reporting. In this work, Caputo's last clinging romantic notions of war dissolve into numbers, growing numbers of men, Americans and Viet Cong, who are dead or wounded.

He lists and adjusts the daily numbers of men who have been shot by both the enemy as well as their own, men who have been blown up by mines or mortar shells, run over with convoy trucks or killed or wounded in helicopter crashes. Here, death begins to take on a uniform look. The dead Americans, Vietnamese, men, women and children all look the same, smell the same, and end the same. In supervising the dead, Caputo also comes to a deeper understanding of the effects of war. Men are dying. Homes on both sides are being wrecked. It is during his stint at this job, when he begins to wonder what America is really doing in Vietnam.

Chapter 10 Analysis

As Caputo is fully initiated in death counts, his attitude towards the war begins to change. Although he marks separate columns for the Americans killed and the enemy, Caputo begins to see the unity of the dead. As these casualties of war mount up, he wants to see them as numbers, clear and simple, and he is able to until the Battalion's Chaplain urges him to see the numbers from a different angle. Chaplain Ryerson points to the lives of those who are living, those whose lives are wrecked by the loss of the dead. When this concept sinks in, Caputo realizes his greased-in numbers speak of the damage that is being done to both sides. He is left, like the American nation during this time period, wondering if the war is really for nothing.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

In an attack that could have been easily prevented had the headquarters command post been on their toes, the VC's breach their airfield's perimeter and attack headquarters in the middle of the night. By morning, the fighting is over, but several important planes have been destroyed.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Perhaps a bit too much resting and too many Liberties and movies in the dark have lulled the American soldiers into a fall sense of security. The old "they can't touch us" mentality has returned, and the VC targeted in on it. With one swift attack, the enemy crumbles the American's wall of safety, and the soldiers are left to pick up the pieces of their mistake.

This sense of security is reminiscent of the feeling that so many of Caputo's men had felt upon landing in Vietnam. It is the feeling of being invincible that surfaces when one is out of danger. Caputo's men lost that feeling the moment they left the security of their bases and tromped out in the jungle after the VC, but the men at headquarters have been sitting too long behind desks. They've lost the sense of fear and urgency that pulls upon the strings of men in the field, and here lies the extreme difference between those fighting the battle directly and those calling the shots. One is knee deep in the urgency of the fight. The other is becoming complacent with the danger of the war. This great divide eventually leads to what many today consider to be the foundational cause of our defeat in the Vietnam War.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Life is returning to normal for headquarters when Caputo, in his role of casualty reporting, has to identify three men from his old C Company. This experience proves to be greatly distressing for him as after their identification, he dreams nightly, and daily, of these dead men marching under his command.

Caputo sees himself as the officer of the dead, and everywhere he looks he sees the faces of the dead transposed on the faces of the living. Around him many others succumb to acute anxiety and depression, killing themselves or others in fits of uncontrolled behavior. All the while, Caputo keeps track of the numbers.

In the meantime, "Operation Blast-Out" begins where "Three thousand marines and ARVN soldiers supported by tanks, artillery, planes, and the six-inch guns of a U.S. Navy cruiser, managed to kill two dozen Viet Cong in three days." (Chapter 12, p. 203.) Statistics like this become all too common for men like Caputo, who have to keep track of the score.

Some soldiers and suspected VC are captured and brought to headquarters in Danang. Old and young alike are questioned one by one. VC suspects are shipped off to the south for further questioning (and most likely execution by the South Vietnamese Army) while the innocent civilians are released to return to a land rummaged by war.

Chapter 12 Analysis

As the war continues, men are beginning to come unglued. Constantly being surrounded by or lurking in the shadows of death has a way of doing that to a man. Words are attached to man's emotional suffering, words the American nation saw time and time again during the Vietnam Era, as well as afterwards. There were feelings of anxiety, depression and madness. Even with the men who somehow manage to overcome these words, other words sneak in to take their place, hardening spots once soft with unspoken codes of ethics.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

With the start of the monsoon season in September comes an increase of three to four times the numbers of the dead. Caputo's old battalion ships out to be replaced by eleven hundred men fresh from the United States. Within six months, approximately a third of them would be killed or wounded.

Still the war continues. Headquarters moves its location to the Dai-La pass and more numbers are greased in on the scoreboard of deaths. When Walter Levy, a man who trained at Quantico with Caputo, is listed as another casualty of war, Caputo once again struggles to find meaning in the war and the deaths it is bringing.

Chapter 13 Analysis

The war has turned from a backyard brawl to a full out death trap for the American soldiers. Their death tolls are rising far more quickly than the Viet Cong's numbers, and it seems as if their deaths only result in more of the same. This startling fact is what eventually led to the opposition of the war by both the American public and the soldiers fighting in Vietnam. At this point in the story however, both sides are still determined to win less all their struggles be for nothing. Neither side can see yet that there is no winning in a war of this magnitude.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

As autumn moves in, the VC attacks continue to increase as does the wars casualties and damage to American aircraft. The war is turning uglier on both sides. Prisoners are taken, brutally tortured and executed as a means to deal with the raging emotions field soldiers constantly face. Fear and complete disregard for the "rules of engagement" reigns supreme among the men.

In November, Caputo's repeated requests to transfer to line duty are finally granted. He moves to C Company's base camp and begins rotations on perimeter defenses with his new platoon. Within twenty-four hours, he is rethinking his decision to reenlist on the line. He sticks it out however, and after a month of nightly VC attacks, sniper fire and monsoon rain, Caputo is granted his first R&R in nine months.

For three days in Saigon, Caputo begins to live normal life again. He eats at the Continental Palace Hotel, takes walks along ambling streets, and hears gunfire far, far away. He even toys with the idea of deserting the war before realizing that he could never do that to his men still fighting back on enemy lines. Just when life appears to be carefree, Caputo is back on a flight to Danang. Then the fear returns.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Life on the front continues as Caputo wrestles with the realities of war and his desire to romanticize it. With his transfer back to the line, he nearly caves in on his first night in the trenches. Too many nights away from the tension of fighting have softened him, misled him, and now he is a child with a gun, learning how to walk and shoot all over again. Within a month, the romance of war has vanished completely for Caputo. Crippling fear and a touch of madness steps in to take its place.

Many might have defected under these severe conditions, yet the theme of unity rears its head in this novel. How could any man desert his own men? Although some did do just that in Vietnam, Caputo's memories of the moments that bonded him to his men hold them to him and them to him. They are willing to die for each other. Their loyalty has now shifted from defending their country or some far off ideas of anti-communism to each other, plain and simple. In this chapter, the reader is hit with this bond of brotherhood and the hope that so many, both in the war and at home in America, felt during this phase of the war. There was the hope that every soldier would just return home in one piece.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

The men of Third platoon are in a state of complete exhaustion. They bicker with each other menacingly, fight with commanders, dream of mutiny, fight urges to beat little old ladies, and walk around half crazed with fear and tension. There is no release for them, no rotation to where a safe position awaits them. All the battle lines face this same problem.

Caputo and his men rejuvenate however when sent on assignment to cover D Company in their attempt to clear VC out of Hoi-Vuc. Caputo and his men have the mission of distracting the VC long enough for D Company to move into the village and take over.

In the middle of the jungle, they locate the VC near a river and Caputo's lead men signal him to ready the men. Caputo gets half way across the clearing to tell his men the good news when fire erupts around him.

Chapter 15 Analysis

The war is breaking down the men into small pieces of what they once were. Everyone is tired, angry, depressed, hungry and wet. By now, the soldiers have fought long enough and hard enough, yet their work, injuries and deaths amount to nothing. Earlier battlegrounds conquered by American soldiers have been reclaimed by the VC the moment the Americans pull out. This results in a lot of tension and frustration for those that have fought for nearly a year. Their romantic notions of war and their dreams of ending the Vietnam saga quickly have died. Now they are just plain angry, angry at the VC for not being subdued, angry at the men in charge who keep throwing them into ambushes, angry at the government who sent them into a war that couldn't be won. They are ready to take that anger out on anyone or anything that steps into their path, be it friend or foe.

While those in the field struggle to maintain their grip on sanity, those in cushy offices seek to erase their doubts and fears with stern demands the rules of order are kept. Those out fighting are left to break down in the insanity of a war and its regulations that no longer make sense.

They keep fighting however. A sense of duty grips them, duty not to the war or the country that sent them into it, but to each other. The fight together is all they have left.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

In their victorious military barrage in creating a cover for D Company, not one man in Caputo's division is harmed. However, a number of VC are killed. Caputo and his men feel the elation that comes from a group of men acting as one unit in a life or death situation. For Caputo that feeling is heightened by the knowledge that his orders and quick thinking cause the death of the VC.

Caputo's men spend the night on the spot where they have just fought, anxious and fearing retribution from the VC. In the early morning, they are shelled by either their own men or the enemy; they aren't sure. Still his platoon escapes unharmed.

Catching their breath from the attack, they move to Hill 92, slashing their way through six or seven hours of jungle and booby traps, to set up a patrol. When they finally reach the hill and just start to rest for the first time in twenty-four hours, Captain Neal radios in a Christmas cease-fire with an order "to return to friendly lines as quickly as possible." (Chapter 16, p.277.) No helicopter lift is possible, so the men have to walk back through the jungle to safety.

With cheers and high hopes of some much needed rest, the men set out immediately. Just when they are feeling confident in their march back, tragedy strikes in the form of an ambush detonated mine. Nine men are wounded badly. All are enraged that they came so close to a temporary release just to have that release snatched away by the VC.

After the severely wounded are airlifted out, the remaining men find a wire leading into a near-by village and burn it down in retribution for harboring VC. Calmly they watch as Vietnamese civilians run from the flames. They walk away without anger, without regret, with only the emptiness of their pain.

Chapter 16 Analysis

The men are at the end of their rope. They are wet, cold, tired and hungry, not to mention dazed by twenty-four hours of attacks, and they think they are getting to escape. Here they learn that there are no escapes from war. Again Caputo's story weaves in a heavy dose of symbolism as the men who thought they had escaped injury find it hiding where they least expect it, covered up, just waiting for a trigger to push the button that brings about the pain. Perhaps this is what happened to so many men upon the return from the war. The lucky ones who didn't sustain injuries discovered that they had injuries after all. They were just covered up, like the mine, waiting to be tripped over and then BOOM. Men exploded with anger or fear or pain.



The men learn also learn here that war does not accept cease-fires anymore than it accepts differences between the Viet Cong and the Americans. Boundaries are breaking down as Caputo and his men become little more than numbers on a scoreboard of casualties of war. This realization creates anger, so much anger in fact, that they are becoming dangerously numb.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

The men injured in the ambush are lucky. They either return to combat or are sent home to heal. None die. On January 6th, however, a daytime helicopter assault lands C and D Companies in the heat of enemy fire. The soldiers aren't as lucky this time. Many succumb to injuries and death, almost all to a blind rage that dissolves into mob-like behavior. They burn down Ha Na village, home to nearly 200 Vietnamese civilians, without thinking and without flinching.

Somehow in inflicting such horror on others, the soldiers' own horrors dissipated with the smoke of the village fire. By the end of the evening, there is only ashes and calm.

The next morning, the wounded and dead are lifted out by helicopter, firing continues on both sides and the war continues.

Chapter 17 Analysis

The psychological damage of the war is bubbling up out of deep wells of pain within the soldiers. Months of rain, mosquitoes, rotting flesh, waiting, frustration, disease, illness, death, more waiting and more frustration - not to mention fear, uncertainty, and subordination to orders that no longer make sense - have created a dangerous mix of emotions that no longer leaks out of the men in snide remarks and improper behavior. The dam has broken and their emotions are flooding the battlefield.

To say they burn down a village of over two hundred people because they are losing control is an understatement. Not only are they losing control, but they are also stepping outside themselves, watching as another part of them commits unspeakable acts. They are powerless to stop themselves.

This is evidence of psychotic behavior that plagued many soldiers both during the battle of Vietnam and afterward. Here we see its full development from nightmares, to angry fits of rage geared at innocents, to full on temporary disembodiment. With this chapter the message is clear. The human psyche is not equipped to handle the extremities of prolonged war.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

The madness continues as the war takes the lives of the wounded and the morals of the rest. The trouble begins when Lance Corporal Crowe becomes privy to information on two Viet Cong's location. An informant by the name of Le Dung, formerly questioned and released, not only points out the Viet Cong home in Giao-Tri, but he draws pictures of their weapons and gives the whereabouts of their platoon. However, instead of Crowe arresting the two VC, he takes the information back with him to camp and reports it to Caputo.

That is the first mistake. The second is that Caputo feels an increased need to "do something," ultimately deciding to extract revenge for the anger and fear that rages inside him. He orders the capture, and if necessary the execution, of the two identified VC. As he had hoped, the VC are killed, and one, coincidentally enough, turns out to be their informant, Le Dung.

Five months later, Caputo finds himself on trial for the murder of these very same VC, along with Crowe. Caputo is frustrated by the military court's blind eye to the madness brought on by war. He is tried as if he killed a man walking down the safe streets of America, where no war is raging, where friends aren't being blown to bits by hidden mines or randomly being picked off one by one by enemy snipers.

Caputo's testimony, truthful though it is, is skillfully designed by his representative to obscure the truth, as is Crowe's. Of course, this is overlooked by the higher-ups who just want this case out of the light of scrutiny, lest it reveal too much about the war or the minds of the men who are fighting it.

Crowe is found not guilty, and Caputo is found guilty of only one minor charge (of changing his testimony under oath) that results in little more than a slap on the wrist. Shortly after, he receives an honorable discharge and flies back home to America, along with one hundred and fifty other nameless, faceless men.

Chapter 18 Analysis

The explosions of fear, frustration and rage result in yet another casualty, only this time the perpetrators are brought up on charges. Caputo and Crowe both feel the guilt and shame of what they have been trained to do all along - kill VC. They are left to defend themselves against the very system that created them. They stand before brass and suits that have never fought the battle lines and they are not allowed to say, "The war made me do it."

What else can they say, really? The war did make them do it, wearing down their morals and their sanity until all that was left was a ball of primitive fight or flight emotions in a

human shell. That is exactly what military training is supposed to do, strip the men (and women) of their humaneness and replace it with the heart of a killer.

This astounding indifference to what the soldiers of Vietnam have experienced stuns Caputo and leaves him with the feeling he has been deserted by his own country. He feels the weight of what he has become under their reign, by what every man after him who fights for his country will become, must become. Here the reader is struck with the full impact of what Caputo and his men have become. The heavy significance of their slow downward ethical spiral is one that Caputo urges us to attach to all wars.

Still the wars go on.



Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

Ten years and one month later, Caputo is back in Vietnam, this time as a correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*. As rumors of the end of the war circle the globe, he feels an overwhelming need to see the conclusion of a decade of the horrors he had witnessed in service. Amidst North Vietnamese air raids, shellings, and missile fire, thousands of people seek to escape from the ensuing surrender of the South Vietnamese and its allies.

When the Americans are given the order to evacuate, Caputo watches in numb horror as the plane ahead of his is shot down. His helicopter, however, clears the field with no time to spare. He, along with other correspondents, soldiers, and officials, glide over the South China Sea where a helicopter assault ship greets them with a safe landing and a hot meal. Saigon falls shortly after, and the end of the war falls heavily on all those who served there.

Epilogue Analysis

From a proud Marine who will end the battle in a few months, to an enraged soldier whose forced to watch the casualties of war from the battle lines, to a Vietnam War protestor, to a correspondent covering the end of the Vietnam era, Caputo comes full circle with his emotions on the war.

In the end, all Caputo is really left with is the same sinking feeling the rest of the American country has. He finds himself asking if there was any point at all in the loss of all those lives, any purpose at all for the Vietnam War. For Caputo, as well as countless others both then and now, the reader sees the answer to that question is a resounding, no. Caputo warned us in the Prologue, carried the theme throughout his novel and warns the reader again in the Epilogue, that we should not be fooled by the romance of war. War is death. It is waiting and frustration, fear, anger, and sadness. It is days of uncertainty and dread, yet the world repeats those mistakes again and again. The reader is left to ponder the wisdom of that decision.



Characters

Philip Caputo

Philip Caputo serves as the narrator and the main character of the novel. At the tender age of twenty, Caputo enlists in the Marines in the hopes to end his dreary days of comfortable living in the small mid-western suburban town of Westchester, Illinois. He enters the war with romantic notions of being a hero, with thoughts of ending the war within a few short weeks or months and returning home to a parade of patriotic countrymen that will slap him on the back and ask him to tell them another heroic tale of his adventures in Vietnam. What he finds, however, is a rude awakening to the realities of a battle fought in the middle of the jungle with Viet Cong who refuse to play by the rules he has learned at Officer's Training School.

Throughout the novel, Caputo struggles for his personal identity as well as for meaning in the world of war. He fights to save his country and Vietnam from Communism. He fights to prove to himself and others that he is a man. He fights because it is his duty as an American man. Perhaps most of all, he fights because, after twenty years of comfort in suburban American, he needs to feel danger in order to feel alive.

Caputo is determined to be brave and honorable even while his world of ethics and rules crashes around him. He is an American man. He is a Marine. Yet during his exposure to direct hand-to-hand combat, he increasingly finds that neither of these two really answers who he is.

Through rising death counts, disease, illness, endless days of waiting for something to happen, the frustration when it doesn't and the fear when it does, he discovers that he, along with all the men he serves with, has a rudimentary instinctual side that kicks in despite the training they have received and the backgrounds they each come from. He discovers he is not a hero, or a man. He is prey that is responding to the threat of a predator. He is kill or be killed. He is cruelty and anger and sadness and madness all wrapped so tightly that he feels his very core is exploding from the inside out.

Through endless days of uncertainty and dread, he realizes he is everything and yet nothing that he thought he was. As the novel progresses, Caputo grows beyond his romantic notions of war, seeing it for what it is. Lives of the living and the dead wasted by pointless fighting. This thought is a hard one for Caputo to swallow, and he fights that lesson until a sort of temporary insanity sets in. When he orders the capture of two VC with hopes of their execution, he tries to overcome this feeling of futility. He succumbs to the pressure to retaliate, to kill in return for all the killing.

The military courts take five months to try him for this infraction of what war is supposed to be, but by then Caputo has already come to see his mistake. It wasn't in ordering the capture of the VC or in hinting that it was okay to kill them if the captors wanted to. It wasn't in retaliating in anger or being filled with rage from a war that ate away at him like



the rotting flesh of his wet and worn feet. Rather, Caputo realizes his mistake was in buying that he should go to war for a country that truly did not understand what that meant.

As result of this growth, Caputo is able to return to Vietnam ten years later to take one final look at the destruction reeked on Vietnam. Countless numbers have died or been wounded. Innocent civilians have lost their homes and livelihoods. The fighting continues, but nothing has changed. This final deep look at Vietnam sets Caputo's spirits free to realize he played a part in a chess game of conflicting governments. He was a pawn, a very lucky pawn at that, but a pawn none the less.

Viet Cong

Although this categorizes a group rather than an individual character, the Viet Cong in this novel become a unit that act and are treated as one. If there is a protagonist to this story, it is the enemy VC. That is how they are perceived in the beginning, at least. However, after Caputo and his men stumble upon a jungle hut complete with letters and photos of the VC's family, the soldiers realize that the enemy has a familiar face, one just like their own.

This discovery confuses the soldiers who are left to wrestle with their convictions to fight men, some even boys, just like them. In recognizing themselves in the face of the enemy, they feel a deep sense of shame and guilt for fighting with their own.

As the novel progresses this guilt is replaced with anger when the men realize their war efforts of nearly a year have been futile. Their men are dying. The Vietnamese are dying. Still, nothing is changing. The war wages on leaving nothing but destruction in its wake, and that makes the soldiers angry, angry enough to see the Viet Cong - with faces and lives the same as theirs - as enemies once again. The Viet Cong come to represent that inner pool of insecurities deep inside mankind which when faced both angers and shames every person. They are the enemy inside of each of human, which when battled against, inevitably lead to a powerful lesson on our own psyches.

Captain Neal

On his first day back on the lines after serving as an adjutant, Caputo reports to Captain Neal. Captain Neal sleeps peacefully at night in a tent half a mile away from the line. That is Caputo's first grudge against him. Unlike other leaders who are out there in the same conditions as their men, Captain Neal appears to have a fairly cushy existence.

Caputo's grudge is compounded by constant reprimands, lack of military aid when requested, and more than all the others put together, petty regulations and expectations made from his safe office when Caputo and his men come under enemy fire on the battlefield.



Throughout the remainder of the story, Caputo offers us only glimpses of Captain Neal's redeeming qualities. Neal is highly enraged over the burning of Ha Na, he insists Caputo take his first R&R that he's had in Vietnam, and he stands with Caputo at his trial supporting him with the comment, "We lost half the company. I hope they realize that. We'd lost half the company then" (Chapter 18, p. 336.)

Although Caputo often disdains Captain Neal, ultimately Caputo shows the reader that Captain Neal is just a man under fire like everyone else. He sleeps in a more comfortable bed, and he's not risking his life in the same way that Caputo is, yet Neal is fighting right along side with them in the only way he knows how, in the safety of numbers, and rules, and regulations. Neal's character shows the reader how everyone handles the stress of war differently, some with guns, some with numbers, each fighting in their own way.

Chaplain Ryerson

Acting as a concerned Chaplain for the Regimental Headquarters, Ryerson forces Caputo to consider the wasted lives of all those who are killed and all those who are left to pick up the pieces afterward. He is the first one to raise Caputo's awareness to the fact that the battles being fought might be more about rank and prestige than they are about Communism.

Corporal Sullivan

Caputo first meets Corporal Sullivan at Okinawa, Japan when Sullivan is a gentle twenty-two year old up for sergeant. In Vietnam, he becomes a sergeant and a father of a baby boy back in America, neither of which protect him from being killed while filling canteens on the river. Caputo is away at assistant adjutant training in Japan when Sullivan is killed, and he finds Sullivan's loss - the first in their Company - to be overwhelming.

Jose Gonzales

The first wounded man in Caputo's company, Gonzales is wounded when a small, antipersonnel mine blows off his left foot. He is flown back home to America never to be seen again. As he is the first casualty of war the men see personally, Gonzales is significant as the first step in the breakdown of their romantic notions of war.

Lance Corporal Crowe

When a Vietnamese informant tells the Marines of two VC's locations, it is twenty-three Lance Corporal Crowe, nicknamed Pappy by the younger men, that brings the information to Caputo. Later Crowe is ordered to take a team of men to the informed location and capture the VC. One of the men is shot while trying to escape. However, it



is Crowe who shoots the other, when they are on the trail home. The circumstances around the second VC's death are extremely controversial, especially when it turns out that the man Crowe shot wasn't a VC at all, but the young boy that had been his informant. Five months later, Crowe and Caputo are on trial for his murder.

Although both men are declared not guilty of the murder charge, it is perhaps Crowe who gets the shorter end of the stick. He followed a direct order to shoot to kill if the enemy tries to escape. That order was of course preceded by the commanding officer's order to shoot any Vietnamese they could. He, like Caputo, had done his job, and in the heat of the moment he most likely mistook a twig snapping in his face for the Vietnamese boy running away. His trial serves as a reminder to the reader that although the rules and regulations changed with the conditions of the war, the United States government refused to accept or consider the changes. They expected the men to act like trained men, overlooking the animal instinct that comes out in men during the confusing times of direct combat. Men like Crowe and Caputo were left to hold the embers of the fire that burned because they believed in a system that deserted them.

Lieutenant General Thompson

Lieutenant General Thompson comes to visit in Danang, and the world is turned upside down at headquarters to make sure he is pleased with what he sees. Dead VC are not only brought in, but dug up and cleaned off so the General can view them. Caputo, and many of the men including Chaplain Ryerson, come to resent the disrespectful show of the dead that is put on for him. At best, the General represents all those in American government who are far removed from the Vietnam War. Death is cleaned up and made to look respectable for them so the fighting can continue.

Major General Lew Walt

Caputo is in awe of Major General Lew Walt. He worships him as some sort of hero. Winner of three navy crosses, General Walt believes in fighting with his men, not sitting behind a desk and ordering them to fight. He leads his men from the front. Surprisingly enough it is General Walt that later orders his troops to fight other South Vietnamese troops (their allies,) and Caputo comments that not only did the General lose his respect then, but he also feels that there is no way America can ever win a war when Generals are allowing their own armies to fight each other.

Radar

Radar serves as Caputo's attorney during his trial over the murders of Le Dung and Le Du. With great skill and determination, Radar convinces Caputo that he cannot use the stress of war to explain the murders of the two Viet Cong as then the government would be forced to face a number of other charges that it is not willing to entertain. Radar knows the United States Government will never admit their part in the murders.



With his expert advice, Caputo is found not guilty of all but one minor charge, thus releasing him from his service with honor.

Ruff Puffs

Ruff Puffs is the slang name given to the South Vietnamese army who are allies with Americans.

Walter Levy

Walter Levy is an old friend of Caputo's from Quantico. Levy is a tall, quiet man with a strong sense of duty whom Caputo greatly admires. Levy is in Vietnam only two weeks, when he is shot by the enemy while retrieving a dead corpsman he thought only wounded. Caputo is serving as assistant adjutant away from the front lines, when he hears of Levy's death.

In the pain of his death, Caputo remembers when they trained together at Quantico, and he tries hard to remember the last words he remembers Levy saying. Caputo remarks that if he can just remember those words and write them down, perhaps Levy could be as real to the reader, as he still is to Caputo. But he has forgotten the words. Levy comes to represent all the countless nameless, faceless men who died in Vietnam. Their words are no longer heard, or even remembered, and Caputo feels great sadness at this thought.

Caputo takes over Levy's platoon, when he returns to the front lines after serving as assistant adjutant.

William Campbell

The platoon sergeant in Okinawa, Japan, William Campbell is a die-hard soldier. Rising to six feet three inches and two hundred and twenty pounds, with red hair that matches his flaming temper and his reputation for violence, he knows how to keep the men in line. He is greatly feared by the men who serve under him. Although he is inferior to Caputo in rank, he never budes an inch to acknowledge it. Campbell accompanies Caputo and his men to Vietnam, becoming a valuable resource for military insight.

If Gonzales served to symbolize the beginning of the breakdown of Caputo's romantic notions of war, Sullivan's death seals the beginning of the end.



Objects/Places

Annamese Cordillera

A seemingly endless expanse of jungle in the North of Vietnam, the Annamese Cordillera is a jungle as large as the sea. Mountain range after mountain range rolls in the distance as far as one can see. The Cordillera is referred to as the "Out there," and is feared by local Vietnamese and by foreign soldiers alike. This area is known for Bengal tigers, cobras, and Viet Cong ambushes.

Anxiety, Depression, and Fear

As the war progresses, anxiety, depression and fear are the emotions that take hold most deeply in the hearts of the soldiers. Each of them, in their own right, become an obstacle to the men in the jungle, and they have to fight as much with their own psyches as they do with the enemy, in order to overcome the crippling effects of these emotions.

ARVN

The regional militia battalion comprised mainly of the South Vietnamese army is called the ARVN. Perhaps the hardest idea for the American soldiers to understand is that this army is often littered with VC who spy on enemy operations at the same time they fight against their own.

Battalion/Regimental Headquarters

Battalion Headquarters, unofficially known as the rear, is the area where those not involved with direct combat operated. It is here that the war is plotted on glossy maps, the dead are tallied daily on giant charts, and life is quite a bit more slow and predictable. There are hot showers, beer, and sometimes even movies. Company headquarters is first established in Danang before moving over a year later to the Dai-La Pass where it is protected by two hills and the bay.

Big Ivan

Big Ivan is the code name for a battery of eight-inch howitzers. Their drowning roar can be heard from miles away. Although at first most men, including Caputo, flinch at their overwhelming sound, that flinching is soon replaced by gratitude when the American units turn their defensive operations to offensive ones. Many Americans' lives are saved by Big Ivan.



Bouncing Betties

Mines that bounce waist high before exploding are often called Bouncing Betties. Most soldiers greatly come to fear these types of mines over many of the others, as they were designed to cripple rather than to kill.

Bunching Up

When the men "bunch up" with less than ten paces between them, they become sitting ducks for enemy fire, mines, or missiles. Caputo's men first have to deal with heavy casualties when they "bunch up" near a tree, where an ambush detonating mine has been laid.

Cafard

A type of psychological trauma, which advances in stages, Cafard is most obviously spotted by the display of hatred for everyone and everything.

Camp Upshur, Virginia

Camp Upshur stands as the location of Caputo's Basic Training. Here, Caputo first learns the basics of military life, how to survive in the wilderness, how to shoot to kill, and most importantly, how to obey the orders of those in charge and obtain their praise. After his initial training here, Caputo finds it difficult to fit back in at college.

Continental Palace Hotel, Saigon

Caputo first visits the Continental Palace hotel on his first R&R with the Marines in 1966. He finds it full of healthy men, many of them officers, who laugh, drink and live life in a way that Caputo can only describe as normal. Nearly ten years later, Caputo returns there again to cover the war as a correspondent and is temporarily marooned in the building during the heavy firing of the VC as Saigon approaches surrender.

Dai-La Pass

During September's monsoon in 1966, Regimental Headquarters is moved from Danang to the Dai-Lai Pass. Two hills and the bay guard the headquarters' new position, and they act as a secure location for tanks, tented camps, gun supplies, and fields of barbed wire and mines.



Danang, Vietnam

American established its first stronghold in Vietnam in Danang. This small inlet housed an airstrip, company battalions and headquarters, which are defended against the Viet Cong until the end. Surrounding the headquarters at Danang, small villages comprised of thatched huts dot the horizon, water buffaloes plow fields while Vietnamese civilians stroll dirt paths in their conical hats. Danang could actually have been quite picturesque, had it not been for the war that rages around it.

Expeditionary Period of the War

Caputo terms the time frame between March and September of 1965, the "expeditionary period of the war" as it serves as the beginning of the war. Deaths are unheard of, casualties are rare, and the United States operates a mainly defensive position in Vietnam. After this time period, injuries and deaths increase markedly and the United States extends into offensive operations.

Frontal Enfilade

Frontal enfilade is a potentially dangerous situation for soldiers that comes about as a result of having to pass through a narrow passageway. Lining up in single file in close quarters exposes the soldiers to enemy fire, which could easily wipe out several men with one shot.

Giao-Tri

The first village Caputo reports as being burned by the Marines is Giao-Tri. Soldiers are on a routine search of the hamlets near Hoi-Vuc, and they come under sniper fire at Giao-Tri. After a grenade explosion ignites the thatched roof of a nearby hut, the Marines go wild with screams and shouts throwing grenades into pits and shooting rifles into bomb cellars. The huts burn down one by one, as the fire spreads from roof to roof. Their platoon commander tries to stop them, to no avail. The men have gone wild with anger and the need for retribution.

Ha Na Village

A large village of over two hundred civilian Vietnamese, the Ha Na village falls as another casualty of the Vietnam War. After a Christmas cease-fire is called, Caputo and his company are returning to their base camp, when an ambush detonating mine goes off, wounding nine of his men. When a lead wire is found running from the mine into the village, the soldiers burn the entire village in retribution for those who had been injured by the Viet Cong the village is hiding.



Hoi-Vuc

The first village Caputo and his men search in Vietnam is Hoi-Vuc, a small group of hamlets perched on the twisty river of Tuy Loan. Fire had already come to this village, and it is here that Caputo is confronted with the indifference of the villagers who have become accustomed to the casualties of life and war. Without looking at the Marines or showing any sign of recognizing they are being wronged, the villagers stand by as their houses are searched, their belongings trashed.

Howitzers

Self-propelled military firing devices "as big as tanks," howitzers fire shells weighing several hundred pounds at the enemy. Howitzers become synonymous with the sound they make, a whistling/hissing noise overhead that ends in an abrupt BOOM (or a thud if the shells land during the monsoon season) when they explode upon impact.

Liberty

Liberty or Cinderella's Liberty (for a Liberty that ends at midnight) is a temporary leave that is granted to the soldiers to help them relax away from their bases/headquarters.

Loyola College

When Caputo first signs up for service with the Marines, it is on the campus of Loyola College in Illinois. His move back home with his parents after leaving Purdue, and his boredom with Loyola at least partly leads to him wanting to escape his humdrum existence by becoming a marine.

LZ

The shortened name of the landing zone, the LZ is any area that has been cleared for military aircraft. Landing zones can be termed hot or cold, hot if it is one the enemy is openly firing at during the soldiers landing attempt, cold if it is not.

Military Camps

Away from the strongholds of headquarters, soldiers set up military camps in the jungle when their mission turns to an offensive one. These camps are mainly temporary resting places established quickly by digging foxholes, setting up patrol units around the perimeter, and sometimes by booby traps/mine fields being laid along approaching trails.



MLR

MLR stands for the main line of resistance and consists of an area comprised of fences, minefield, wire and soldiers who guard the area defensively at all costs.

Purple Heart Trail

The Purple Heart Trail is so named because of the amount of casualties that result from soldiers who are forced to patrol it on searches for the VC. It is a narrow trail, easily ambushed by the VC. It also contains numerous easy spots to place trip wires, mines, or explosives that can wipe out unsuspecting soldiers. The Purple Heart Trail is one of the most feared active regions of the jungle.

Quantico, Virginia

After basic training, and nearly completing his undergraduate degree, Caputo comes to Quantico for advanced training. During this time he learns military tactics, weaponry, and codes of conduct he will later come to question. He returns to Quantico for Officer's Training School after graduation from Loyola College, and his military training zooms in on a not-so-subtle form of mind control. He learns the history of the Marines, that they have never, will never be defeated, that they make men of boys, all boring lessons lost on Caputo until field exercises take him closer to the danger he seeks.

Reconnaissance by Fire

Reconnaissance by fire is a military term for firing at thick brush in order to determine whether or not the enemy is hiding inside. It is used as a means to draw enemy fire on American troops. Once the enemy fire is seen, the opposition's hiding spots become easy targets for American soldiers. This tactic is also used in the novel as a morale booster. When the American soldiers are firing, even at nothing, they feel less afraid.

Stronghold Hills (327, 368, 268, 1098, 324, & 52)

As in most wars, the safest place for a soldier to be is on a hill. From the high vantage point, he can see enemy whereabouts, troop operations, and potential attacks. It is often said that whoever controls the hills, controls the war. Each of the hills listed above is thus highly sought after. Each in turn is taken by the U.S. Marines during some point of the novel, only to be reclaimed by the VC at some later point.

Tan Son Nhut, Saigon

Caputo first visits the small city of Tan Son Nhut in Vietnam on his R&R leave in 1966. He finds that although the sounds of war can still be heard in the distance, he can walk



the streets undaunted, drink in the bars unmolested, and sleep peacefully in a place that feels a lot like home might. When he visits there again nearly ten years later as a newspaper reporter, it is overrun with evacuees trying to escape the VC who are descending upon the city in one of the Vietnam Era's final sieges.

Westchester, Illinois

Caputo's hometown of Westchester, Illinois serves as a model suburban town. It looks like and acts just like any other small town in America in the mid-1960's. People there are hard-working, patriotic Americans who nestle themselves away behind picket fences and apple pie.



Themes

Personal Identity

A key theme that runs throughout the novel is one of personal identity. Caputo, as well as all the other men that serve with him, must discover who they are. The novel begins with Caputo as a boy that wants desperately to prove that he is a man and he is capable of being a hero like the ones he's read in all those schoolbook fables in his small southwestern suburb. He is caught up in the energy of a nation, which is being led to fear Communism almost as much as it does becoming complacent. He hungers for adventure and danger, if nothing else, but to prove to himself that he is really living life.

This mentality is often one that many youth struggle with during their adolescent years. A feeling of invincibility is coupled with a desire to experience every tasty morsel that life has to offer and the result is often a dangerous insistence on taking chances in areas that are often deadly. Of course, as one ages and comes to understand that dangers and risks have consequences and one learns how to weigh these consequences more accurately, better decisions can be made.

Caputo remarks, however, that he and everyone else seem destined to learn this concept the hard way. By enlisting in the Marines and heading to Vietnam, that's exactly what he did.

The novel follows Caputo's progression from the proud boy who can single-handedly take on the world to a man who is broken - mentally, spiritually, and physically - by the very danger and adventure he had so vehemently craved. Life on the front lines transforms the men from eager schoolboys to men who are tired, angry, and depressed. They have fought long enough and hard enough to see their romance of war vanish into the reality of it. They no longer walk with their heads held high, their eyes looking straight ahead. Now, they crouch in the shadows in the case of enemy fire. Their eyes sweep back and forth across trails laden with hair thin trigger lines attached to mines that kill and maim and haunt their dreams. Death steps too closely, and men like Caputo eventually evolve into a deeper understanding of themselves, their enemy and the war that has taught these lessons the hard way.

By the Epilogue of the novel, the reader can see that not only has Caputo come to a greater depth of spirit, but he has also overcome his own fears, angers, and prejudices that he began with as that naive youth from Winchester, Illinois.

To say that Caputo's evolution is an exceptional one is an unfair assessment. Caputo shows the reader, through the barrage of soldiers he introduces, that this evolution is one made by all the men he served with. This is the evolution of the human spirit in times of war. Bitterly sad at times, cruel, and unfair, this is the cycle that humanity has been repeating since the beginning of time.



Patriotism

One of the biggest reasons for any war is a Nation's strong sense of unity. Caputo clearly emphasizes this in his Prologue, first chapter, and Epilogue, while subtle remarks run throughout the book to emphasize the changing attitude that the soldiers had towards their country. In fact, by the end of the novel, Caputo subtly criticizes President Kennedy for exciting the American public to such an extent that they would take on a war that they couldn't win under the false pretenses that the American public really knew nothing about at the time.

In the jungles of Vietnam, the reader sees Caputo's loyalties change from protecting his country and defending American allies from the threat of Communism to protecting and defending his fellow infantrymen. This startling change in his perspective is what later leads to him being an advocate of anti-war demonstrations. Caputo even admits to writing letters to the government explaining what the Vietnam War is really like and begs the government to withdraw men who are needless dying, all to no avail.

This swing of ideals in patriotism is offered to the reader as something to chew over after the novel is completed. Caputo asks the reader if defending one's country, or fighting in causes that are often misleading is really worth the damage he has just walked him through. He asks a serious question, which deserves a serious answer.

Death

A book on Vietnam could not exist with a thorough exposure to death. This book is no exception as Caputo takes us right into the midst of the horrors of the jungle with him. Like his personal identity and his views towards his country, Caputo's views on death change significantly as his fighting days roll by.

Caputo admits that he and his men often feel like boy-scouts when they first arrive in Vietnam. They are newly introduced to an environment that they have trained for in military exercises, which were operated under safe conditions with blank ammunition. Because there is so little action, and even less injury or death for them to deal with personally, the men find it increasingly difficult to separate their training from their environment while they are on a defensive operation.

However when their commanders switch them to offensive operations and they are actively seeking combat with VC in the jungles, they are exposed to a heap of injuries and deaths, which in time begins to change their view of death. Death becomes not something that is just out there in the distance far away from each of them. It becomes something primitive, stalking them from around blind bends in the trail, in the safety of their numbers, and in the quietness of filling canteens by the river. This transformation brings with it a heap of emotional and psychological problems for the soldiers as Caputo explains how many men break into fits of rage, deep depressions, or bouts of insanity.



As the men come to know death more closely, Caputo then introduces the reader to two more important events that give death a deeper dimension. He shows the reader that the soldiers came to understand that the VC are just like them, boys with letters and photos of family and friends back home. He also shows the reader that once dead, everyone looks and smells the same. With these two images, he works hard to tear down the walls of death so that the reader can see the unity in the living and the dead. Understanding this concept is crucial to understanding the point the novel is making.

Style

Points of View

The story is told from the first person point of view of the narrator, Philip Caputo. As this story is represented as a memoir (a true life story) rather than a fictional account of Caputo's experience in Vietnam, telling the story in first person allows the reader to feel a certain closeness with Caputo as the novel progresses.

Caputo begins his life story with an urgent emotional plea to the reader to understand what made him feel like he wanted to fight in the war and what makes him feel now, as a grown man, that he cannot condone war. As he begins the novel with such strong emotional tones, the reader begins to feel that Caputo is a trustworthy storyteller. He will not lead the reader into dishonest accounts of his time in Vietnam, nor will he offer excuses or apologies for what he recounts. He merely wants the reader to share the journey with him, so that war might be avoided in the future.

After this bond is established, Caputo takes the reader into his military training, his first assignment as an officer, and finally into the jungles of Vietnam. Although the reader sees glimpses of the lives, actions, and personalities of other characters, it is only through Caputo's eyes that their story is told. Since Caputo has allowed the reader to see his views of others, his personal desires and his admitted shortcomings in previous chapters, as the novel progresses, the reader is aware of what is happening to Caputo, even as he seems not to be in the story itself. The novel then traces Caputo's journey from a proud, naive young man who wants to play soldier for excitement and bragging rights to a man who is disillusioned with the realities of the war.

From this perspective, the reader comes to understand the changes in Caputo's mentality before he, himself, comes to terms with them in the novel. This creates a powerful "knowingness" for the reader that ties them firmly to the events of war that Caputo and his men are experiencing.

Setting

The most obvious important setting is of the jungles of Vietnam. This is where the battles are fought, won and lost. This is where boys become men, and training meets reality. Here, the complex nature of the human spirit is tested to its limits.

In this setting, jungles could be said to be symbolic of the tests in life every human must undertake in order to reach his or her full potential. The jungles are the training grounds for the human spirit. Battles of our psyches, our emotions, our shortcomings are fought in thick brambles that hide our own inner understanding from ourselves. It is so often in life like we are fighting wars with ourselves in the midst of darkness.



It comes as no surprise that every step the soldiers make in the jungle comes with consequence. So it is with every human's personal development. When one touches fire, there is a consequence. When one yells at a friend, learns how to fish, hugs one's mother, each of these has a consequence that is embedded deep within our consciousness. Each of these events is then filtered in with the rest to help us develop as individuals. Although the jungle setting can be cited as symbolism for all of this, the reader must not forget that Caputo wants us to understand his personal experiences at war. Thus attempts to symbolize too many items in the book, could be dangerous to the readers understanding of the novel.

However, there is another setting, which plays a more subtle, but yet perhaps, more important theme in the story. The setting of the nation during the Kennedy Era is easy to overlook with all the action taking place in the jungle. However, this setting is what Caputo points to as the reason the United States went to war in the first place. America was still on high from WWII. America had never lost a war, and the military was not the only group that thought America was invincible at the time. Coupling that emotional environment with President Kennedy's repeated address to the American nation to serve their country and their fellow man in whatever way they could, a strong sense of unity and urgency enveloped the nation. This is the energy that bred the desire in so many young men to become involved with the war. After the death counts rose to unimaginable numbers on both sides, this energy folded in on itself and the American nation was left to pick up the pieces of many of the ideals they had falsely held during this era.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is at a middle level, which most readers can quite easily understand. Caputo's accounts are given in such a way as to involve the reader on an emotional level as well as on a physical one.

Caputo gives firm descriptions of his environment, holding the reader by the hand as if he knows that the reader is walking in unfamiliar territory. Caputo gives sensory details of most of the key locations where he is stationed in an attempt to draw the reader into his world of fighting. The reader is introduced to the sight of the expanses of jungle that roll out under the helicopter's wings, the feel of the elephant grass cutting across his arms and face, the sound of Big Ivan and sniper fire whistling too close for comfort, and the smell and taste of injury and death.

When Caputo uses military terminology, he explains new terms and abbreviations one time, which is enough for the reader to understand the logistics of a language that is foreign to most civilians.

Structure

The novel is structured in eighteen chapters, which takes us through a mostly linear account of Caputo's life in relation to the Vietnam War. The reader is led through a



progression of a short account of Caputo's adolescent and early college years. This is followed by a more lengthy account of his military training in Virginia and his first officer station in Japan. This climaxes to the meat of the novel in Caputo's involvement in the Vietnam War. It ends in a sort of denouement, where the reader sees Caputo ten years later looking back on his service of Vietnam and reporting the final stages of the war as a war veteran.

From start to end, this novel encompasses Caputo's life from adolescence to mid thirties. The Prologue is an exception to that as it allows the reader to see a grown man looking back over his life, relating his adult viewpoint on the events that happened in his youth. However the bulk of the novel, sixteen of the eighteen chapters, involves a period that begins with Caputo's involvement with war on March 7, 1965 and ends with his honorable discharge early in 1967.

In these chapters, the story wraps itself around small chunks of time, which Caputo stretches out so that the reader can become fully involved in the action. This, along with the first person point of view used by the author, forces the reader to read through Caputo's war accounts as if one were going through them oneself. Those chapters that involve several weeks or months at a time are mainly used by Caputo as bridges that the reader must cross in order to continue the journey into Caputo's world of war.

In the Epilogue, two days of Caputo's final bought with Vietnam ten years after his service are covered. They are stretched out, almost as if Caputo is resistant to letting his memories of Vietnam go.



Quotes

"We went overseas full of illusions, for which the intoxicating atmosphere of those years was as much to blame as our youth." Prologue, p. xii

"Throughout [the Marines training] we were subjected to intense indoctrination, which seemed to borrow from communist brainwashing techniques." Chapter 1, p. 12

"As for the rest, they are now just names without faces or faces without names." Chapter 2, p. 27

"So I guess every generation is doomed to fight its war, to endure the same old experiences, suffer the loss of the same old illusions, and learn the same old lessons on its own." Chapter 5, p. 81

"It was the same feeling we had experienced on the first operation, a sense of being marooned on a hostile shore from which there was no certainty of return." Chapter 7, p. 113

"The horror lay in the recognition that the body, which is supposed to be the earthly home of an immortal soul, which people spend so much time feeding, conditioning, and beautifying, is in fact only a fragile case stuffed full of disgusting matter. Even the brain, the wondrous, complex organ that generates the power of thought and speech, is nothing more than a lump of slick, gray tissue. The sight of mutilation did more than cause me physical revulsion; it burst the religious myths of my Catholic childhood." Chapter 7, p. 128

"...Vietnam had fused new and harder strands to the bonds that had united them before the Danang landing, strands woven by the experience of being under fire together and the guilt of shedding first blood together, by the dangers and hardships shared." Chapter 8, p. 136

"The stench of death is unique, probably the most offensive on earth, and once you have smelled it, you can never again believe with conviction that man is the highest being in earthly creation." Chapter 10, pp. 169-70

"That night I was given command of a new platoon. They stood in formation in the rain, three ranks deep. I stood front and center, facing them. Devlin, Lockhart, and Bryce were in the first rank, Bryce standing on his one good leg, next to him the faceless Devlin, and then Lockhart with his bruised eye sockets bulging. Sullivan was there too, and Reasoner and all the others, all of them dead except me, the officer in charge of the dead." Chapter 12, p. 199

"Asleep and dreaming, I saw dead men living; awake, I saw living men dead." Chapter 12, p. 201



"That was the trouble with the war then: the long lulls between actions gave us too much time to think." Chapter 12, p. 201

"You were faithful. Your country is not. As I write this, eleven years after your death, the country for which you died wishes to forget the war in which you died." Chapter 13, p. 223

"We were all beetles, scratching for survival in the wilderness." Chapter 15, p. 261

"His comrades were around him, but he was alone. We could see the look of separation in his eyes. He was alone in the world of the badly wounded, isolated by a pain none could share with him and by the terror of the darkness that was threatening to envelop him." Chapter 16, p. 283

"Not long afterward, I began to be teased by doubts. It was the other half of my double self, the calm and lucid half, warning that something awful was going to happen." Chapter 18, pg. 317

"They had taught us to kill and had told us to kill, and now they were going to court-martial us for killing." Chapter 18, p. 322

"If the charges were proved, it would prove no one was guaranteed immunity against the moral bacteria spawned by the war. If such cruelty existed in ordinary men like us, then it logically existed in the others, and they would have to face the truth that they, too, harbored a capacity for evil. But no one wanted to make that recognition. No one wanted to confront his devil." Chapter 18, p. 331

"We had believed we were there for a high moral purpose. But somehow our idealism was lost, our morals corrupted, and the purpose forgotten." Epilogue, p. 345



Topics for Discussion

Discuss how the soldiers' view of their own morality changes through the novel's progression.

Discuss how men's loyalties changed from their country to their men in the novel. What events led to this transformation?

Compare/contrast Caputo's sense of personal identity from the beginning of the novel, when he first enlists as a Marine with his sense of identity, to when he returns to Vietnam as a field correspondent.

Discuss the role the jungles of Vietnam played on the men's moral and emotional status.

Explore the role of the Viet Cong, as they relate to each human's inner demons. How can they be considered beneficial to one's personal development? How can they be considered detrimental to one's personal development?

Explain why it was a hard decision for men to defect from military operations in Vietnam; even though they knew staying in the battle would most likely bring their death.

Explore the reasons why humans hold onto rules and regulations during times of crisis or high stress.

Discuss scenes in the novel that show evidence of either mob behavior or personal choices. How do each of these conditions bring about personal developments for Caputo and his men?

Caputo reports that, in his military training, he felt as if the Marines were subjecting him to mind control. How could this be useful for soldiers? How could it be harmful?